

# **The SSI Extension for Elderly and Disabled Refugees Act**

*Introduced by Representatives Cardin, Houghton, Levin, and English*

The legislation would provide a two-year extension of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for refugees, asylees and certain other humanitarian immigrants. Under current law, refugees lose their SSI eligibility after they have lived in the U.S. for seven years, unless they become citizens. In many cases, SSI is the sole source of income for these elderly and disabled refugees, who have fled political and religious persecution in their home countries.

- The bill would extend SSI eligibility for two years for refugees and other qualified humanitarian immigrants, including those who had their SSI benefits cut off in the recent past. This policy would be in effect through fiscal year 2007. President Bush proposed a similar extension for one year in his FY 2005 budget.
- Actively fleeing persecution, refugees usually come to the U.S. with few resources, and they often do not have relatives in this country to help them. Those receiving SSI are unable to work because they are disabled or elderly.
- According to data from the Social Security Administration (SSA), up to 36,000 refugees and other humanitarian immigrants in the United States could reach the current seven-year cut-off for SSI through 2007. SSA assumes only about 40% of these individuals will become citizens before hitting the time limit, which was established by the 1996 welfare law. (Nearly all other non-refugee immigrants who came to the U.S. after the enactment of the 1996 welfare law are completely barred from receiving SSI unless they become citizens.)
- SSI benefits are paid to low-income elderly and disabled individuals, with monthly benefits equaling \$564 per individual and \$846 per couple. Some individuals gain access to Medicaid solely through their SSI eligibility (meaning some refugees hitting the SSI time limit also will lose Medicaid coverage).
- As the Administration has acknowledged, a primary barrier to citizenship within the seven-year SSI time limit for refugees is lengthy delays in processing of citizenship applications by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (An immigrant must live in the United States for at least five years before even applying for citizenship.) Other barriers to citizenship, especially for elderly refugees, include a lengthy application, an in-person interview, a test of English proficiency and civic knowledge, and a \$250 fee.
- SSI is the only federal means-test program to impose an eligibility bar on refugees that have lived in the U.S. for more than seven years and have not obtained citizenship, even though all of the recipients of SSI are disabled or elderly and often face difficulties in obtaining citizenship.